

# White Gold: The Mojave Desert and the Biggest Water Project You've Never Heard Of



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## **Abstract**

More than any other factor, the development of Southern California has been shaped by water. In the 20th century, state and local governments completed massive infrastructure projects to import water to Los Angeles and its arid environs. Today, a lesser-known project has emerged: Cadiz, Inc., a venture capital operation, seeks to pump water from beneath the Mojave Desert to sell to urban water districts. We use historical documents from the Western Water Archives and relevant contemporary materials to explore the significance of this project. At issue: Cadiz, like past projects, prioritizes water extraction and economic growth over the efficient use of existing sources and deemphasizes potential ecological and cultural harms. Until we fully embrace water efficiency and involve Indigenous stakeholders in policymaking, projects like Cadiz will continue to prioritize extraction over these detriments.

# **Background**





**Figure 1:** State Water Project map

Figure 2: Fenner Basin in the Mojave desert

- **State Water Project (SWP):** A 1960s government project that fueled Southern California's population growth
- Cadiz Water Project: Huge, private venture capitalist project planning to pipe Fenner Basin groundwater to suburban LA residents

# **Research Objective**

How does support for and opposition to the Cadiz Water Project compare with past 20th-century Southern California water engineering projects?

### Methods

**SWP:** Two Western Water Archives documents: a 1962 statement from the Mojave Water Agency supporting the Feather River project and a speech titled "Without Vision — and Unity — the People Perish," by William E. Warne, director of the California Department of Water Resources Cadiz: We read Cadiz, hydrologist, and activist publications, and interviewed Brian Bowcock (Three Valleys Municipal Water District), Michael Madrigal (Native American Land Conservancy), and Anthony Brown (hydrology consultant)

# **Findings and Conclusions**

### Finding one: Conservation as extraction

The Mojave Water Agency's (1962) proposed "conservation" measures include "deliberate lowering of water tables and vegetation control."

**Figure 3**: From "Statement of Mojave *Water Agency..."* (1962)

GALLONS OF WATER

LOST TO EVAPORATION IN 2021

(APPROXIMATE)

Figure 4: Cadiz website evaporation tracker uses "conservation" rhetoric

Bowcock: "Three Valleys' position is very clear: any time [we] can find another source of water, that's our purpose."

# **Findings and Conclusions Cont.**

### Finding two: Future growth used to justify extraction

By
William E. Warne, Director
ate Department of Water Resour

Warne (1961): "In the next 30 years our population will have overrun its present resources and the trend of growth and development will have been reversed without the project."

Cadiz: "existing water supplies are insufficient to meet the long-term needs of the region"

Figure 4: From "Without Vision..." (1961) Figure 5: From Cadiz's FAQ page

### Finding three: Activists are challenging this rhetoric

Madrigal: "the Cadiz project is definitely an extension of environmental injustice and an extension of settler colonialism in one of its most blatant forms"



### Recommendations

Figure 6: 2012 protest at Orange County's Santa Margarita Water District Meeting

- Increase water efficiency and recycling
- Fully incorporate Indigenous stakeholders in planning
- Madrigal: "maybe each generation is going to have to fight against [water extraction], unless we find some real solutions"

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